



# HEARD ACROSS MONTANA

An electronic newsletter in support of public safety services in Montana  
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## IM Weekly Highlights



- Motorola assigned a new project manager, Mark Christensen, to the IM Project, replacing Todd Matsuo.
- IM received the signed BLM permit for the Belle Prairie second master controller site.
- Motorola completed functionally testing on the Pacific Steel and Flying-J sites with help from Dale Osborne, Montana Highway Patrol.

## Communicating Across Barriers: 'Interoperability' Project Important for Responders in Montana

Guest Editorial in *The Missoulian*, March 5, 2010

By Alan Michaels, Glendive Chief of Police and Kevin Bruski, IM Executive Director

Mention the word "interoperability" and you're likely to hear, "Inter-what?" But enter the word into your favorite search engine and you'll find references to computers, cell phones, health care information databases, gaming devices, even military weapons systems. Put simply, interoperability means allowing different forms of technology to share data or otherwise "talk" to one another.

For public safety and emergency service providers, interoperability has come to mean one thing: the ability to communicate across physical barriers, such as mountains, or across political boundary lines. It also means communicating over different radio technologies.

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security has made interoperable communications a priority for both urban and rural localities across the United States. In Montana, the Schweitzer administration—like the Martz administration before it—has envisioned an interoperable system that would serve every county in the state, as well as state agencies such as the Montana Highway Patrol.

What will interoperability provide? First and foremost, it will allow emergency responders to communicate with each other - and with their dispatchers - across more of the landscape. In many counties, IM is eliminating dead spots that have hindered communications for years. Local ambulances will have constant radio contact with dispatchers and hospitals during long-distance transports. Disaster responders can call in help more easily from the state or from adjacent counties.

Those kinds of local needs have largely defined the IM project. While other states have centralized the

planning and supervision of interoperability systems in the state bureaucracy, Montana turned to counties and sovereign Indian nations. Those local governments banded together into "interoperability consortia," which have done much of the heavy lifting of this project. Their contributions, made primarily by people acting in volunteer capacities, cannot be overstated.

As a result, Montana has made more progress—for less money—than many other states. We've certainly had our challenges, but we also have avoided many of the issues that have cropped up in other places.

In 2005, the local consortia joined with the Montana Departments of Justice, Transportation and Natural Resources and Conservation to form Interoperability Montana, a nonprofit association that coordinates the construction of hilltop towers and the installation of high-tech communications equipment. IM also routes funding from government agencies to local projects.

In 2009, aided by the addition of a small band of full-time professional staff, the hard work of IM volunteer leaders yielded concrete (and steel) results:

- The "Northern Tier Project" is making interoperable communications possible across Montana's high line from Libby to Plentywood. That system also is linked to an existing interoperable system in Lewis and Clark County.
- IM and the U.S. Air Force formed a "win-win" partnership that has enhanced communications between Malmstrom Air Base and its missile fields in central Montana. The same infrastructure also connects counties from Harlowton to Conrad.
- We upgraded equipment that serves the Montana Highway Patrol along Interstates 15 and 90 in southwestern Montana. That work will provide more capacity for Montana Highway Patrol and local governments.
- IM has installed new infrastructure near Big Timber, Billings, Dillon, Townsend and Whitehall, among other places. In 2010, we'll continue that work and expand our work to include projects in eastern Montana.

Even as we're building, we're preparing to maintain the network once it's complete. We've received valuable input from local government leaders and public safety service providers. Their ideas will help us craft a plan that will balance services with available funding. (By the way, their comments can be viewed on our website—[www.interop.mt.gov](http://www.interop.mt.gov)—along with a wealth of other information about the project.)

IM still has more work to do—and more funding to secure—before interoperable communications are available in all of Montana's 56 counties. Our goal remains constant, however: to improve public safety by providing emergency responders with another communications tool that allows them to talk to the people they need to reach, anywhere, anytime.

### Montana Team Attends Policy Academy in Mobile

By E. Wing Spooner [espooner@mt.gov](mailto:espooner@mt.gov)

Three Montana officials and Kevin Bruski, IM Executive Director, attended an Interoperability Communications Policy Forum in Mobile, Alabama on February 25-26. Glendive Mayor Jerry Jimison, Madison County Commissioner Jim Hart, and Missoula City Assistant Fire Chief Jeff Logan participated in this two-day event that helps county, city, and municipal officials learn about challenges to achieving communications interoperability.

"All the Montana representatives were glad to participate," said Kevin. "The speakers were very well informed and addressed a variety of important policy-level issues and concerns."

The Forum, sponsored by the National Association of Counties, in collaboration with the National League of Cities, dealt with interoperability planning, budgeting priorities, and building bridges across disciplines and jurisdictions. It also provided proposals for improving policymaking leadership.

Participants were exposed to new ideas for learning how to advocate for and implement actions related to governance, training & exercises, technology and its use. They also learned about ways to become involved in regional, statewide and nationwide planning efforts.

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### Northern Tier Meeting Upbeat

By E. Wing Spooner [espooner@mt.gov](mailto:espooner@mt.gov)

Roger Smith, Interoperability Montana (IM) Radio System Administrator, gave a comprehensive update on the status of generator issues, repairs, code plugs and the microwave system along the Northern Tier at the consortium's regular meeting on March 4 in Havre. He reported that he is still assisting some counties and tribes with their fleet mapping, a task that needs to be completed soon in every Northern Tier jurisdiction. Roger also gave the status report on Motorola accomplishments on the trunking system this past month. Additionally, frequency and interference issues were discussed, with an emphasis on how they are being resolved.

Members also spoke about sustainability issues and the importance of supporting a request for DHS grant funds for maintenance and repairs. In addition, participants talked about the new AES encryption standard and learned that the IM is applying for a waiver with the state.

Aviat (formerly Harris-Stratex) representatives participated in a brief conference call to discuss the 60-day acceptance period and beneficial use of the microwave system.

Wing Spooner, Public Safety Services Bureau (PSSB), provided additional details about the recently-released Border Interoperability Demonstration Project grant. A sub-committee will be working on the grant application.

Mark Canton, Motorola, distributed an up-to-date inventory list for members to review to decide which radios they want to upgrade. Scott Bradford, PSSB, clarified COPS grant funding that will be used to pay for upgrades. Local jurisdictions will have to match 12.5% of the cost.

Blaine County Sheriff Glen Huestis presented ideas for developing the Big John site in his county while Kevin Bruski, IM Executive Director, reported on last the IM Technical Committee meeting as well as the status of the Integration Planner position hiring process. Consortium members were reminded to continue working on development of their SOPs. Logistics of an upcoming training and exercise opportunity also were discussed.

Members discussed distribution of returned equipment that had been stolen by a Havre radio store manager. Many local law enforcement agencies patronized the shop. The store manager was sentenced for his crimes on Mon., March 1. For more information, visit <http://saltlakecity.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel10/slc030110c.htm>

Sheriff Wayne Dusterhoff, Glacier County, announced that the group will start meeting every other month. The next meeting is set for Thurs., May 6 at 9:00 am at the Great Northern Inn, 1345 1<sup>st</sup> St., in Havre.

### Upcoming Meetings

- **Mon., March 8**  
IM Finance Committee (IMFC)  
Helena • 9:00 am - noon  
Anderson ZurMuehlen, 828 Great Northern Blvd.
- **Mon., March 8**  
IM Governance Committee (IMGC)  
Helena • 1:00 - 5:00 pm  
Anderson ZurMuehlen, 828 Great Northern Blvd.
- **Tues., March 9**  
IM Project Directors (IMPD)  
Helena • 9:00 am - 3:00 pm  
MACo Large Conf. Rm., Lower Level  
2715 Skyway Drive
- **Wed., March 10**  
Central Montana Consortium (CMICC)  
Great Falls • 10:00 am  
Disaster & Emergency Services Office  
521 1<sup>st</sup> St. NW
- **Wed., March 17**  
Funding Sub-Committee  
Billings • 1:00 pm  
Billings Police Dept. Training Ctr., 4810 Midland Rd.
- **Thurs., March 18**  
I-15/90 Corridor Consortium  
Butte • 10:00 am  
Butte Chamber of Commerce, 1000 George St.

